Rules of the Game
Reading Spell Descriptions (Part Two)
By Skip Williams

Fortunately for the harried DM and the eager player, spell descriptions are arranged to provide lots of useful information quickly.

Anatomy of a Spell Description

A basic spell description comes in two parts. The first part is a single column of information roughly 10 lines long (sometimes a little more, sometimes a lot less) that begins with the spell's name. This is what we'll call the "header" in this article. The header is packed with information about the spell, provided that you know how to read it. It's helpful to think of a spell's header as its game statistics, much like the statistics block at the beginning of a monster's entry.

The second part of a spell description consists of one or more paragraphs of text that explain what the spell is all about and also adds certain details that aren't fully explained in the header.

The Spell Header

The header contains most of the vital statistics for the spell. The information presented in the header is the foundation of the spell, and it takes precedence over anything you find in the explanatory text below it. If you find (or think you've found) something in the text that contradicts the header, use the information in the header.

All spell headers are arranged in the same general manner, and the elements in a spell header are explained in great detail in Chapter 10 in the *Player's Handbook,* pages172-177. That's a great deal of material, so here's an overview, line by line.

Spell Name

This first entry in the header shows the name by which the spell is generally known. You may encounter the spell under a different name, but this is rare unless your DM has decided to rename spells to add some flavor to the campaign.

Spell School

Magic in the **D&D** game is divided into eight schools of magic, and the second entry in the header shows the school. Pages 172-174 in the *Player's Handbook* discuss spell schools. A spell's school usually doesn't affect play much, though if you encounter a magical effect when it's operating, you can use a *detect magic* effect (and a Spellcraft skill check) to determine the school of magic involved. That, in turn, may allow you to surmise what the magic is doing, at least in broad terms. The Spell Focus feat also depends on a spell school, as does the wizard's school specialization option.

Subschool: Sometimes a second entry in a spell header contains a parenthetical entry that shows a spell's subschool. A subschool represents a portion of the school that works in a certain way. A spell's subschool often indicates how the spell functions in play, so it's worth paying attention to a subschool entry when you see it. Referring to the notes on subschools on pages 172-174 of the *Player's Handbook* often can settle questions about how a spell works. Here's a quick overview of schools and subschools. This overview covers only the highlights.

- Abjuration: Protective spells that block or banish things or that negate other magic. This school has no subschools.

- Conjuration: Spells that bring other things into being, move things around, or provide healing.

As a general rule, when you conjure something, you cannot make it appear in thin air or inside another object or creature. This means you cannot aim the spell so that what you conjure falls and crushes or damages what's below it.

This school has five subschools:

Calling: These spells bring creatures from some place in the campaign to the caster or to the place where the caster aims the spell. By definition, a calling spell has an instantaneous duration, and that means it cannot be dispelled (though some abjurations might banish the called creature back where it came). In general, any effects that a called creature produces remain behind and function for their usual duration even after the spell ends or the called creature leaves, or both. A calling is a two-way trip; the creature called has a one-time ability to return from whence it came.

Creation: These spells make things on the spot. Only creation spells with durations longer than instantaneous can be dispelled.

Healing: These spells restore lost hit points to the living or cure other afflictions.

Summoning: Summonings are similar to calling spells. A summoning can bring either creatures or objects, depending on the spell. Unlike a calling, a summoning usually has a short duration and can be dispelled. A summoned creature cannot use any summoning abilities of its own while the summoning lasts, and it cannot use any spell that has an XP component. It also cannot use any spell-like ability that would have an XP component if it were a spell. When a summoning spell ends (because the spell's duration expires, because the creature is killed, or because the spell has been dispelled), any magical effects that a summoned creature has produced immediately expire. Like a calling, a summoning is a two-way trip for a creature.

Teleportation: These spells send the caster or a subject the caster designates from the caster's location (or place where the caster aims the spell) to some other place of the caster's choosing. The trip usually is one-way and it's instantaneous, so it cannot be dispelled. A teleportation spell involves travel trough the Astral Plane. If access to the Astral Plane is blocked, teleportation spells don't work.

- Divination: Spells that provide some kind of information. Divination has one subschool (but not all divinations are part of that subschool).

Scrying: A scrying spell places a magical sensor in some location of the caster's choosing. Although the

descriptive text for this subschool doesn't mention it, you usually do not need line of effect to a location to aim a sensor or to receive information from it after you cast the spell.

The sensor from a scrying spell usually has the same sensory capabilities that the caster has, though the spell's description may limit those; for example, the *clairaudience/clairvoyance* spell allows either sight or hearing (caster's choice). When a scrying spell allows the use of a particular sense, the sensor has at least as much sensory ability as the caster has. If the caster has an ability such as darkvision (whether from a special quality or a spell), the sensor has it, too. Effects that emanate from the caster (such as the *detect magic* spell) don't extend through the sensor, however. The sensor also acts as a separate sensory organ for the caster, and the spell works as described even when the caster has some impairment such as blindness or deafness; for example, if you're blinded, you can still "see" with a *clairaudience/clairvoyance* spell. In such cases, the spell's sensory ability is equal to the human norm unless the spell's descriptive text specifies a greater ability.

- Enchantment: Fantasy literature often uses the term "enchantment" as a catchall for any magical effect. In the **D&D** game, however, enchantment spells affect the mind, and spells from this school always have the mind-affecting descriptor (see below). Objects, constructs, undead, plants, and mindless creatures in the **D&D** game can never be enchanted, either because they have no minds to affect or because they are immune to mind-affecting things. The enchantment school has two subschools.

Charm: These spells make their recipients think well of the caster. A charm makes a subject friendly, but it doesn't allow the caster to control the subject like a marionette.

Compulsion: These spells force the subject to take a certain action or act in a certain general way. Many compulsions specify the kind of action the subject must take. The *animal trance* spell, for example, makes animals and magical beasts do nothing but watch the caster. Other compulsions allow the caster to specify some action or activity, but nothing more (*suggestion*, for example). The most powerful compulsions turn the subject into an automaton, or nearly so (the various *dominate* spells, for example).

- Evocation: Spells that manipulate energy (or sometimes matter) usually to produce a destructive effect. There are no subschools.

- Illusion: Spells that deceive the senses or the mind. There are five subschools.

Figment: Spells that create false sensations. A figment cannot make something seem to be something else. Most figments cannot duplicate intelligible speech; when they can the spell description will specifically say so.

A figment is unreal and cannot produce real effects; it can't deal damage, support weight, provide nutrition, or act as a barrier (except to sight if the figment is visible, as most are). If you create the image of a creature with a figment spell, you usually can make it move around, but only within the spell's area, which usually isn't mobile.

Glamer: Spells that make the recipient look, feel, taste, smell, or sound like something else, or even seem to disappear. Beware of attempts to use figments as glamers and vice versa. For example, you can use a figment to create an apple tree, but you can't use a figment to make your buddy look like an apple tree.

Pattern: A visible magical image, something like a figment, except that the image has some affect on viewers' minds. All patterns have the mind-affecting descriptor. Patterns have no effects on creatures that cannot see.

Phantasm: Spells that create mental images. Usually, only the caster and the spell's recipient (or recipients) can

perceive the image. All phantasms have the mind-affecting descriptor.

Shadow: A spell that creates something that is partially real, but made mostly from extradimensional energies the caster brings together with the spell. Shadows are similar to figments, but they can have real effects because they're partially real themselves.

- Necromancy: Spells that involve life force, unlife, or death. There are no subschools.

- Transmutation: Spells that change the properties of some creature, thing, or condition fall into the school of transmutation. There are no subschools.

Spell Descriptors

Sometimes a second entry in a spell header contains information enclosed in brackets. This is the spell's descriptor. Some spells have no descriptors, and some spells have several.

A descriptor is something like a subschool, except that spells from different schools can have the same descriptor or descriptors. A spell's descriptor can have a big impact on play, but only because the descriptor helps determine how the spell interacts with other spells or with a creature's special abilities. You won't find a long list of definitions for descriptors in the game because they don't have much meaning by themselves. Here's a brief overview, however:

- Acid: Acid is a type of energy in the **D&D** game, and most spells with this descriptor deal acid damage. As you'd expect, acid immunity makes the spell's recipient immune to acid damage from the spell. Acid resistance reduces acid damage from the spell.

- Air: Air is one of the four basic elements in the **D&D** game. Air spells usually move air around or allow some kind of movement through the air. The air descriptor doesn't have much impact on play; creatures of the air subtype, for example, don't have immunity to air spells (though that wouldn't be a bad house rule). If your party goes plane hopping, you might find yourself in a place where air spells are somehow enhanced or diminished, however.

- Chaotic: Chaos is one of the four basic alignments in the **D&D** game. Chaotic spells are usually less effective (or ineffective) against creatures with chaotic alignments or with the chaos subtype. They usually have enhanced effects against creatures with lawful alignments or with the lawful subtype. If your party goes plane hopping, you might find yourself in a place where chaos spells are somehow enhanced or diminished.

Sometimes a spell may have the chaotic descriptor and other times it may not. Many summoning spells, for example, gain the chaotic descriptor if they're used to summon chaotic creatures.

A cleric cannot cast a spell with the chaotic descriptor if the cleric's alignment is lawful or if the cleric is dedicated to a lawful deity.

- Cold: Cold is a type of energy in the **D&D** game, and most spells with this descriptor deal cold damage. As you'd expect, cold immunity makes the spell's recipient immune to cold damage from the spell. Cold resistance reduces cold damage from the spell. Creatures with vulnerability to cold take 50% more cold damage than normal.

- Darkness: These spells create areas of dim light that conceal things within the areas they cover. In general, darkness spells negate the effects of light spells of equal or lower level and vice versa.

- Death: Spells that produce instant death in living targets. Targets that aren't alive, such as undead and constructs, can't be affected by death spells. Spells such as *death ward* provide protection against death spells.

- Earth: Earth is one of the four basic elements in the **D&D** game. Earth spells usually move or manipulate dirt, stone and similar materials, or allow some kind of movement through the earth. The earth descriptor doesn't have much impact on play; creatures with the earth subtype, for example, don't have immunity to earth spells (though that wouldn't be a bad house rule). If your party goes plane hopping, you might find yourself in a place where earth spells are somehow enhanced or diminished, however.

- Electricity: Electricity is a type of energy in the **D&D** game, and most spells with this descriptor deal electricity damage. As you'd expect, electricity immunity makes the spell's recipient immune to electricity damage from the spell. Electricity resistance reduces electricity damage from the spell.

- Evil: Evil is one of the four basic alignments in the **D&D** game. Evil spells are usually less effective (or ineffective) against creatures with evil alignments or with the evil subtype. They usually have enhanced effects against creatures with good alignments or with the good subtype. If your party goes plane hopping, you might find yourself in a place where evil spells are somehow enhanced or diminished.

Sometimes a spell may have the evil descriptor and other times it may not. Many summoning spells, for example, gain the evil descriptor if they're used to summon evil creatures.

A cleric cannot cast a spell with the evil descriptor if the cleric's alignment is good or if the cleric is dedicated to a good deity.

- Fear: These spells usually impose one of several conditions of fear on the recipient: shaken, frightened, or panicked. All spells with the fear descriptor also have the mind-affecting descriptor.

- Fire: Fire is a type of energy in the **D&D** game, and it also is one of the four basic elements as well. Most spells with this descriptor deal fire damage. As you'd expect, fire immunity makes the spell's recipient immune to fire damage from the spell. Fire resistance reduces fire damage from the spell. Creatures with vulnerability to fire take 50% more fire damage than normal. If your party goes plane hopping, you might find yourself in a place where fire spells are somehow enhanced or diminished.

- Force: These spells produce or manipulate a kind of magical force whose exact nature isn't detailed anywhere in the rules. Force effects that deal damage can harm incorporeal creatures without the usual miss chance. Force spells cast on the Material Plane can be aimed at, and can harm, creatures on the Ethereal Plane. Force barriers block incorporeal, astral, and ethereal creatures.

- Good: Good is one of the four basic alignments in the **D&D** game. Good spells are usually less effective (or ineffective) against creatures with good alignments or with the good subtype. They usually have enhanced effects against creatures with evil alignments or with the evil subtype. If your party goes plane hopping, you might find yourself in a place where good spells are somehow enhanced or diminished.

Sometimes a spell may have the good descriptor and other times it may not. Many summoning spells, for example, gain the good descriptor if they're used to summon good creatures.

A cleric cannot cast a spell with the good descriptor if the cleric's alignment is evil or if the cleric is dedicated to

an evil deity.

- Language-Dependent: These spells don't function unless the caster speaks to the recipient in a language that the recipient understands. You can use some magical means, such as the *tongues* spell, to provide the necessary means of communication.

Anything that keeps the recipient from comprehending the caster's speech foils the spell, such as a *silence* spell or the recipient's deafness. Casters can use some means of nonverbal "speech" (such as a *helm of telepathy*) to overcome silence or deafness.

Many language-dependent spells also are mind-affecting spells.

- Lawful: Lawful is one of the four basic alignments in the **D&D** game. Lawful spells are usually less effective (or ineffective) against creatures with lawful alignments or with the lawful subtype. They usually have enhanced effects against creatures with chaotic alignments or with the chaotic subtype. If your party goes plane hopping, you might find yourself in a place where lawful spells are somehow enhanced or diminished.

Sometimes a spell may have the lawful descriptor and other times it may not. Many summoning spells, for example, gain the lawful descriptor if they're used to summon lawful creatures.

A cleric cannot cast a spell with the lawful descriptor if the cleric's alignment is chaotic or if the cleric is dedicated to a chaotic deity.

- Light: These spells create illumination. In general, light spells negate the effects of darkness spells of equal or lower level and vice versa.

- Mind-Affecting: These spells shape or interfere with the subject's thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. In the latter case, the subject's senses aren't affected, but the subject's mental responses to her senses are changed.

- Sonic: Sonic is a type of energy in the **D&D** game, and most spells with this descriptor deal sonic damage. As you'd expect, sonic immunity makes the spell's recipient immune to sonic damage from the spell. Sonic resistance reduces sonic damage from the spell.

The *silence* spell description says that the spell provides protection against sonic effects. For all practical purposes, this means that a *silence* spell blocks line of effect for a sonic spell. The sonic spell's area cannot extend into the area that a *silence* spell's emanation fills, and neither can a sonic spell be cast through a *silence* spell's emanation to affect something on the other side.

- Water: Water is one of the four basic elements in the **D&D** game. Water spells usually move or manipulate liquid water, ice or similar materials, or allow some kind of movement through the water. The water descriptor doesn't have much impact on play; creatures of the water subtype, for example, don't have immunity to water spells (though that wouldn't be a bad house rule). If your party goes plane hopping, you might find yourself in a place where water spells are somehow enhanced or diminished, however.

What's Next?

Next week, we'll continue our tour of the spell header with a look at spell levels and components.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and has just completed an18-year run as the Sage of *Dragon* *Magazine*. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden. (Rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends.)

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